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ABSTRACT

This report describes the initial objectives and several modifications in a project to explore and map the research information, products, and strategies which have implications for educational policy. Three additional end products were projected: (1) Unscreened Priority Area Policy Interpretation Bibliographies, (2) Annotated Bibliographies of Priority Areas, and (3) Final Analysis of Strengths, Weaknesses, and Gaps. The changes in the project emphasis limit the evaluation of the effectiveness of the search and analysis methods initially employed. However, general evaluative comments are provided. (STS)

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RESEARCH AND POLICY INTERPRETATIONS SUBCONTRACT

FINAL REPORT

Center for Educational Policy and Management
University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon
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IR005010

The Center for Educational Policy and Management (CEPM) at the University of Oregon is supported in part by funds from the National Institute of Education (NIE). The Center employs authorities from a variety of professional fields, who are encouraged to express freely their views on various subjects. Any opinions expressed in this publication, therefore, do not necessarily reflect those of the Center; nor do they necessarily represent the policies or positions of the National Institute of Education. No official endorsement, therefore, should be inferred from either source.

CEPM FINAL REPORT

INTRODUCTION

This brief paper summarizes the tasks and methodology used in carrying out the activities and completing the deliverables detailed in the subcontract proposal and later in the proposed modification. These are discussed in chronological order.

The CEPM subcontract was developed to meet objectives 1 and 2 of the Research and Policy Interpretation proposal:

Objective 1: To build a collection of exemplary research interpretation products and strategies with implications for educational policy.

Objective 2: To contribute to development of Dissemination/Feedforward System through analysis of strengths and weaknesses and gaps in available products and strategies and the implications of this analysis for the System.

DELIVERABLES

Deliverable 1: Initial Search Strategy. An initial search strategy to identify a broad range of synthesis and interpretation documents was distributed to contractors at the first System meeting. No time was available for discussion and suggestions from other contractors, and the strategy was implemented as presented.

Deliverable 2: Preliminary Analysis. Abstracts of the documents were screened for appropriateness and a list of materials to be collected was generated. References from some of these documents and from in-house CEPM consultants led to other print and non-print materials. At the same time, a survey of some relevant literature and work with in-house CEPM consultants led to development of a preliminary conceptual framework based upon types of syntheses available and the predicted usefulness of these materials to educational policy makers and decision makers. The list of materials available and the preliminary conceptual framework were used to make the preliminary analysis of strengths, weaknesses, and gaps. This analysis presented a broad map of the available materials regarding educational research syntheses and analyses and policy interpretations. The preliminary analysis was distributed to system contractors.

NOTE ON MODIFICATION OF SCOPE OF WORK

As CEPM work proceeded to identify the policy areas to be studied in greater depth, the focus of national contractors was reconceptualized. This resulted in a decreased emphasis on policy interpretations. In addition, Regional

Exchanges identified priority areas inconsistent with CEPM's identification. Thus, CEPM requested a modification of the remaining scope of work in Phase I to allow for an intensive search in the RDX-identified priority areas. In order to retain the work already completed, CEPM proposed an additional deliverable, the unscreened policy-area bibliographies.

Deliverable 3: Unscreened Priority Area Policy Interpretation Bibliographies. On the basis of modified Delphi consultation with CEPM instructional and research faculty, and with state education agency staff, a number of priority topic areas were identified. An intensive search of materials identified in the initial search and of additional references produced a list of materials to be purchased. Many of the print materials were available in the CEPM library or the University of Oregon library. Other materials were purchased. These materials are listed in the Search Category Bibliographies. Available time and funds precluded any analysis of these materials.

Deliverable 4: Annotated Bibliographies of Priority Areas. An ERIC search, a Library of Congress search, and consultation with CEPM and University faculty generated a list of materials for consideration. These were screened for usefulness to educational practitioners and decision makers and a standard format was completed for each entry included in the three annotated bibliographies.

Deliverable 5: Final Analyses of Strengths, Weaknesses and Gaps. The entries in the annotated bibliography for each of the three priority areas were used in the analyses of strengths, weaknesses and gaps, and the indication of implications for the system.

NOTE: The annotated bibliography and final analysis for each of the three priority areas may be used separately although the two papers for all three areas are compiled as a package for submission to the RDX contractors.

EVALUATION OF METHODOLOGIES

The change in intensive search topic areas midway through the supplemental search limits our ability to judge the effectiveness of the method of identifying research and policy interpretations materials. As this change led to discontinuing work on a conceptual framework, our evaluation of this means of analysis is also limited. However, the following evaluative comments are included for any help they might provide to others in designing a search strategy.

Search Methodology

1. On-line computer search of ERIC (RIE and CIJE). Although we designed the initial search strategy including selection of the descriptors in consultation with a librarian training in on-line computer searching, we obtained a fairly high percentage of inappropriate "hits". This fact, together with later reference to appropriate materials not identified, leads us to question

the validity of the on-line computer search unless it is supplemented by other search strategies. We have no feeling of confidence that this search identified the "best" references, and we have evidence that it did not identify all references. However, the on-line computer search was the only practical means of providing an access to materials across a broad range of possible topics as it is inexpensive in terms of actual cost and necessary personnel time.

2. On-line computer search of Library of Congress in intensive search topics. Generally, the on-line Libcon search was time consuming, scattered, and unclear. It was time consuming with respect to appointments for strategy building (collecting and collaborating descriptors), retrieval of responses, and ordering materials not available through the University of Oregon library. The Libcon search was scatters, as descriptors were used which caused an expansion of the original strategy; i.e., reading → literature → comprehension (to cover possible alternatives). Finally, the search results were unclear and needed to be searched manually to assure appropriate material selection. The search itself was of little value as a total of 29 possible sources yielded only one usable selection to be found in the University of Oregon library. This would cause an assessment of the Libcon search for this project's usability to be negligible.

3. Manual Search of ERIC (RIE and CIJE) in intensive search topics. Because of reservations concerning the comprehensiveness of computer searching and the limited topic areas which made a manual search feasible, we conducted a manual ERIC search. The search consumed about 12 hours of time, but it enabled a concurrent beginning of the screening process.

4. Consultation with experts was both a check of the comprehensiveness of the computer Library of Congress search and the manual ERIC search. We found this particularly valuable for the Competency-Based Education topic as it produced not only references but also suggestions for other approaches to information (see CB E implementations section).

Analysis Methodology

Evaluative comments on the analysis strategies are limited by the change in topic areas. The planned and partially developed analysis strategies appear more applicable to policy interpretations of research implications than to straight syntheses of research.

1. Conceptual framework. This approach was used in the preliminary analysis and was expected to be used as a screening device for materials collected for the annotated bibliography. However, the dearth of materials in the policy interpretations levels (particularly level 4) led to abandonment of the strategy. We would suggest that this fact has implications for the RDX in terms of encouraging or producing analytic synthesis which clearly spell out alternatives and policy issues which accompany these alternatives. Such an approach appears valid even when priority areas are such as basic skills rather than definite policy areas such as educational equity.

Note: Although the framework was not used in the general analysis, some use was made in screening and some references are found in the evaluative information section on individual annotated bibliography entries. We found it to be a somewhat useful tool for this purpose.

2. Information on implications check list. Each annotated bibliography entry has a format which assesses the alternatives discussed in the synthesis and the types of implication on which information is provided. And a number of entries in this section have not been completed either because it was not appropriate or because it was not possible to infer the information from reviewing the document. In few instances was this information succinctly stated. Again, we feel that this kind of information should be clearly stated in any synthesis or interpretation of research in order for the synthesis to be useful to educational practitioners or decision makers. We would suggest that RDX encouraged or sponsored syntehsis should include these kinds of information.